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Jennifer McKell,

Director of the Chillicothe and Ross County Public Library

## Chillicothe and Ross County Public Library Passes its first Operating Levy



The Chillicothe and Ross County Public Library passed its first operating levy in May 2010, due to the infamous statewide budget meltdown occurring in mid-2009.

Our library had only a small “rainy day” fund remaining, so when we realized that our revenue was going to be cut by a third, we had to cut a third from our expenses, and do it fast.

Ross County's library service configuration is unusual. We are geographically the largest public library district in Ohio at 624 square miles. The county is served by a Main Library and a large branch, one on each end of Chillicothe and ringed by five small

branches located in villages, some more than 20 miles from Chillicothe. The choice we made was to close Northside, the large branch in Chillicothe.

The branch was closed by mid-August, barely a month after the extent of the budget cuts became known. The public was stunned and angry, and the Board and staff were heartbroken. We moved Northside's services and the reduced staff into the Main Library and an adjacent vacant school building that we own. By year's end, our budget was in the black. Had we not done what we did when we did it, we would have been in fiscal emergency by that time.

Although people offered suggestions on how we could somehow keep Northside open, none were practical and they all avoided the real “L-word”—levy. But most Board members and I were aware that a levy would be the only way to re-open Northside. We decided that whatever our chances of success, the public must be given a choice of whether they wanted it badly enough to pay for it.

After Pike County to the south passed their levy in November, and the competitive Ross County spirit was aroused, we grew more confident. We sized the levy at one mill to replace the revenue that we lost. Conveniently, one mill in Ross County raises close to one million dollars, so we were assisted by round numbers.

Board and staff (on their own time) formed the nucleus of the levy committee. We pursued the League of Women Voters endorsement among others, a long process that most Ross County campaigns don't submit to. Once the League had cut through the rhetoric and misinformation, they realized the truth of the drastic reduction in our revenue and set to work. Veterans of other campaigns donated money, helped organize our door-to-door effort, and sent us foot soldiers. The levy passed 53% to 47%.

We didn't close Northside for strategic reasons, but it was very understandable to voters that because library lost a third of its funding, they were going to lose a third of their services, equivalent to a large branch library. The other two promises that we linked to levy passage were restoring hours in the small county branches and restoring the materials budget which was nearly nonexistent for a while. Those issues were important to a significant number of people, but it was Northside that was the rallying cry.

Northside Branch reopens on January 18, 2011. A 24-foot sign on the front of the building gives the reopening date and adds, “Thanks to YOU.”